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Uncle Noah's Christmas Inspiration

"Uncle Noah," said the Colonel brokenly, "I—" but his voice failed him, and he wrung the old man's hand in silence. [Page 60]

Uncle Noah's Christmas Inspiration

By

Leona Dalrymple
Author of "Traumerei"

Illustrations by
F. C. Yohn

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Uncle Noah's Christmas Inspiration

I

THE twilight of a Christmas Eve, gray with the portent of coming snow, crept slowly over the old plantation of Brierwood, softening the outlines of a decrepit house still rearing its roof in massive dignity and a tumble-down barn flanked by barren fields. A quiet melancholy hovered about the place as if it brooded over a host of bygone Yuletides alive with the shouts of merry negroes and the jingle of visiting sleighs—Yuletides when the snowy dusk had been ushered in to the lowing of cattle and the neighing of horses safely housed in the old barn. There were no negroes now, no blooded stock—no fluttering fowls save one belligerent old turkey gobbler fleeing from a white-haired darky who tried in vain to drive him to his roost in the barn.

In the library of the old house a man, tall and eagle-eyed, peered out beneath bushy white eyebrows at the fading landscape blurred by the dancing forms of the negro and the recalcitrant turkey. He watched the chase end with an impertinent gobble from the turkey, and, at the sound of a closing door in the rear of the house, tapped a bell at his side. Footsteps shuffled along the hallway, and the old negro, breathless from his chase, entered the room.

Colonel Fairfax wheeled with military precision. "Uncle Noah," he said sternly, "to-morrow will be Christmas."

The darky nodded and hobbled hurriedly to the wood fire, bending over as he poked it to hide the look of anxiety in his face. "Laws-a-massy, Massa Fairfax," he grumbled in good-natured evasion, "yoh'd mos' freeze to deaf, I reckons, 'thout sendin' foh me"—he coughed, and amended hastily: "'thout sendin' foh one ob de servants to pile up dis yere fire."

The amendment was but one of Uncle Noah's many subterfuges to convince himself and his master that there had been no changes in the Fairfax fortunes since the old days. That he was the last of the Colonel's retainers, a wageless, loyal old dependent attending to the manifold tasks of a sole domestic, the negro never admitted even to himself. That his quaint pretensions, however, were daily stimulants to the fierce old Colonel hungrily eating his heart out with memories Uncle Noah was well aware. So the pitiful little subterfuges, revealing the subtle understanding of the two, peopled the old house with swarming negroes and the horn of plenty to the joy of both.

But to-day Uncle Noah felt uneasily that the

reference to the servants had not bolstered the Colonel as it usually did, and the old darky groaned inwardly as he added wood to the fire. From the corner of his eye he saw that the Colonel had drawn himself up to military rigidity, an evidence that the old soldier was on his mettle and would brook no opposition.

"Uncle Noah," he said, fixing a stern eye on the old man, "in the Fairfax family there has always been a turkey at Christmas."

There was no suggestion in the darky's affable tones of the erratic manner in which his heart was beating. "Yes, sah," he agreed, "ofttimes mo' than one."

"Owing to circumstances understood by you and myself, but by no one else, there would be no turkey this year save that——"

"Y-e-e-s, sah?" Uncle Noah laid a wrinkled brown hand upon the nearest chair for support.

"We have a live turkey in stock," ended the Colonel firmly, looking squarely into the trembling negro's eyes.

Uncle Noah's heart gave a convulsive leap. The thunderbolt had fallen! The fierce old turkey gobbler, solitary tenant of the crazy outbuildings, the imperial tyrant upon whom Uncle Noah had

bestowed the affection of his loyal old heart, had been sentenced to death by the highest earthly tribunal the old negro recognized.

"Ise—Ise afeard he'll be tough, Colonel Fairfax," he quavered. "I—I—Gord-a-massy, Massa Dick, yoh wouldn't kill ol' Job? He's too smart foh a bird an' he's done a most powahful sight o' runnin', sah; I reckons he's mos' all muscle."

There was an agonized appeal in the darky's voice that cut straight to the Colonel's heart. "Uncle Noah," he said kindly, "it can't be helped. Job goes for the sake of—someone else."

"Ol' Missus?"

"Yes. Thank God, Uncle Noah," the Colonel laid a gentle hand on the negro's shoulder, "that she doesn't know of our—er—financial crisis"—his halting utterance showed how distasteful the words were to him—"save, of course, that we must live with economy, as we have for years. Of the catastrophe of last fall she is ignorant, and a Fairfax Christmas without a turkey would—she must not know," he finished abruptly.

The Colonel had spoken with a simple dignity and confidence that brought the old negro back from the field of sentiment to the barren desert of reality. Dimly in his mental chaos stood forth

three pitiless facts: "Ol' Missus" was grieving her heart out for the son with whom the Colonel had quarreled three years before; of this money trouble from which Colonel Fairfax had shielded her she must as yet know nothing; and there was no turkey for the Christmas dinner. Verily things looked dark for the ill-fated Job, roosting in unsuspecting security in the desolate old barn. With bowed head the darky walked slowly toward the door.

"Uncle Noah," the Colonel's tones were incisive, "you will kill Job to-night."

"I mos' forgot, Massa Dick," faltered Uncle Noah, "dat supper's ready, sah. Ol' Missus done come downstairs jus' foh I chases Job to roost. Laws-a-massy, Massa Dick, can't he live till after supper?"

The Colonel nodded, carefully avoiding the old man's troubled eyes, and went to join his wife at supper.

"Christmas Eve, my dear," he announced cheerfully as he bent to kiss the sweet, wistful face that turned to greet him. "I beg your pardon for keeping you waiting. Uncle Noah and I were discussing to-morrow's turkey;" he gazed calmly at the old negro nervously handling the tea things;

" he has selected a large bird and I have been advising a smaller."

The Colonel opened his napkin and deftly tucked the hole in the end out of sight beneath the table. " Now, Uncle Noah, what is there to-night for supper? "

To Uncle Noah this nightly question had become a sacred institution, a stimulus to imaginative powers highly developed in his quaint dialogues with the Colonel. He forgot the doomed Job. It was Christmas Eve, and his creative gift took festive wings.

" Well, sah," he beamed, " we has a little chicken gumbo, some fried chicken jus' the right golden brown, sah, creamed potatoes, hot biscuits with currant jelly—er—sliced ham and baked potatoes."

Colonel Fairfax thoughtfully considered the appetizing prospect in accordance with the rules of the game. What mattered it that the luscious edibles existed only in the brain of the loyal old darky? The little pretense gave to each a delightful thrill—surely an adequate extenuation of the harmless diversion. As usual Colonel Fairfax found the key to the situation in the closing items of Uncle Noah's list.

" It all sounds delicious, Uncle Noah," he ob-

served graciously, "but I have a touch of my old enemy the dyspepsia to-day. I think I shall have sliced ham and baked potatoes. That, I think, will do for us both."

Mrs. Fairfax agreed, her kindly eyes fixed upon Uncle Noah's attentive face.

"And, sah," Uncle Noah began—it was Christmas Eve and this game must be perfectly played—"shall I attend to de distribution of gifts in de negroes' quarters, sah?"

"Yes," agreed the Colonel, "see that no one is slighted!"

Mrs. Fairfax bowed her wistful face upon her hands to hide the blinding tears, and an odd, uncomfortable silence fell upon the little group.

At length the Colonel pushed his chair back and rose. "Uncle Noah," he said sternly, a suspicious brightness gleaming in his eyes, "that turkey of yours is making a terrible noise under the window. Make him quit gobbling. Patricia, I don't wonder he makes you nervous. He's an old renegade!"

That the object of the Colonel's wrath had long since retired to roost mattered not to his accuser. The turkey had developed a convenient habit of gobbling under the window whenever emotion forced the Colonel to seek a vent in stern com-

mands. Uncle Noah crossed to the window and commanded Job to be silent. Mrs. Fairfax, Southern gentlewoman and thoroughbred from tip to toe, quivered proudly, and, as Uncle Noah returned, bade him serve the supper in tones as well controlled as they were gentle.

II

IN the great barren kitchen Uncle Noah wiped his steel-rimmed spectacles and glared angrily about him.

"Ol' Missus grievin' her heart out foh young Massa Dick," he reflected, "and de Colonel say *'slight no one!'* Gord-a-massy, whut am dis yere ol' worl' a-comin' to? Ebery time ol' Mis' cry for young Massa, Colonel say Job gobbles—"

The old darky choked miserably at the thought of the destined check to Job's gobbling career and, replacing his spectacles, carefully carried in the supper, prolonging its simple service to the uttermost, with the single idea of adding precious minutes to the doomed turkey's span of life.

When at length he sought the barn it was quite dark and the velvet stillness of the night was dotted thickly with snowflakes. With trembling fingers he opened the great barn-door, lit a queer old lantern hanging just within, and hung it high upon a projecting hook. The dim light revealed an antique carriage-house, in one corner of which upon a rude, improvised roost of shingles the tyrant Job slept the sleep of the just and the unjust rolled into one. As the light flickered upon his ruffled feathers the turkey emitted a throaty grunt of disapproval and moved cumbrously around to avoid the light.

Uncle Noah addressed him with great firmness. "Now see yere, Massa Job," he said, "tain't no use yoh puttin' on yoh high and mighty airs to-night. Ise come to interview yoh, sah! Understand?"

Job majestically tucked his head beneath his wing as if to intimate his indifference to the proposed interview.

Uncle Noah surveyed his ruffled back feathers with increased respect. "So," he said, "yoh refuse me an interview, Massa Job Fairfax. Yoh is sleepy, sah, dat's whut's got into yoh." He stroked the turkey with a gentle hand, and, Job, resenting the indignity, withdrew his head from the sheltering wing and pecked at the brown fingers, turning around with a stately movement and facing the light once more with a sleepy blink of his bright, beadlike eyes.

"Now, sah, we can talk," exclaimed the negro in delight. Drawing up an old box he seated himself before the roost and beamed benevolently over his glasses. "Colonel done say yoh gobble under de winder 'bout suppertime," he began confidentially. "When ol' Mis' cry 'bout young Massa Dick de Colonel he jus' gotta scold 'bout sumthin', and as yoh is de mos' important person about he jus' naturally s'lects yoh."

The turkey held his head upon one side, apparently in critical admiration of the darkey's quaint old scarfpin which resembled a grain of corn mounted on a needle.

Uncle Noah, who had always had a faint mistrust of Job's attitude toward this ancient Ethiopian heirloom, promptly removed it to a place of safety. Then with a sudden resolve that no thought of the coming tragedy should mar his last visit with his old companion he rose and sought a dim, cobwebby corner of the barn, whence he returned with a box.

"Dese yere, Job," he explained, "is de flowers whut young Massa Dick have sent to his mother ebery holiday since he done went away from yere. Mornin', I specs, when de Colonel sees 'em at her plate, he'll declare yoh gobblin' sumthin' fierce under de winder again; he always do."

The old negro broke the string of the box and removed a glowing mass of purple orchids—odd, transient tenants of the crazy old barn. Job suddenly reached over and pecked a blossom from its stem, ate the heart with the dainty air of an epicure, and discarded the remainder with a noise akin to a gobble of disgust.

Uncle Noah rose in scandalized protest. "Yoh good-foh-nothin', miserable, sassy turkey!" he

scolded, hastily removing the orchids; "you sartinly is de mos' scan'lous, no-'count bird I ever knowed. Eat one o' ol' Missus's orchards! Laws-a-massy, Job, yoh goes mos' too far. Now, sah, yoh be quiet and listen to dis note I gets from young Massa Dick," and he carefully deciphered the written lines for the listening Job.

Dear Uncle Noah: I have written Foster and Company as usual to send Mother's orchids. They should get there Christmas Eve. Will you put them at her plate in the morning? I find they are the only suggestion of me that the Colonel will allow in the house. I tried another letter this week, but it came back unopened. Uncle Noah, give Mother "A Merry Christmas" for me. DICK.

Uncle Noah laid the letter on his knee and drew from a worn leather wallet several newspaper clippings. They were glowing reports, gleaned from a stray newspaper, of the success of a young architect in a distant Northern city, one Richard Fairfax, Jr. Uncle Noah proudly read them aloud for the hundredth time, interpolating little explanatory remarks to the turkey, who gobbled threateningly but failed to intimidate his tormentor.

"Job, whut yoh think 'bout dis yere quarrel?" Uncle Noah said as the turkey eyed him sternly. "I say de Colonel's too hard on de boy. A quarrel's a quarrel, yoh say. H'm, maybe yoh right, but it's dis Fairfax pride ob de Colonel's dat keep him from readin' de boy's letters, and nothin' else, sah. He sorry for that quarrel, doan you fo'get it. But de Colonel he prouder'n Lucifer. H'm, yoh say yoh understan' pride cause yoh is proud yohself." Then as the turkey relapsed into slumber, "Now, see yere, Massa Job, yoh ain't no mo' sleepier'n I is." Uncle Noah poked the turkey with his finger, and Job arched his neck with a threatening flap of his wings and descended from his perch. "Fight me, will yoh?" demanded Uncle Noah in secret delight, "yoh is de touchiest bird! Yere, fight wid dese yere crusts o' bread."

Job spread his tail magnificently and began an erratic consumption of the bread crusts, pertly taking them one by one from the old negro's hand and arranging them upon the barn floor for a later and more personal inspection. Uncle Noah watched him with misty eyes. Presently his gaze furtively sought the rusty ax in the corner, and a great tear rolled down his cheek. Caught in the wave of a sudden panic he dropped upon his knees and clasped his

trembling hands. The dusky barn, littered with odds and ends, was dimly visible in the glimmering light of the old-fashioned lantern whose slanting rays fell upon the doomed bird and the praying negro. No thought of sacrilege marred the quaint, halting prayer. A terrible earnestness lined the negro's face with a holiness of purpose and made it beautiful.

"Oh, Lord," he prayed, "save dis yere ol' turkey gobbler. I knows, Lord, he's a powahful wuthless bird, but he's all Ise got. Ise jus' an' ol' slave, Massa, whut's been free since de War, an' Job, sah, he understan's me. Lord, I doan wanta live no mo' if I has to kill ol' Job. Send me an inspiration, Lord, an' tell me how I can save his wuthless ol' hide. Save him an'—an' God bless de Colonel! Amen."

For an interval, in which the only sound was that of Job's feet as he strutted about seeking an edible successor to the bread, Uncle Noah remained upon his knees in the attitude of prayer, perhaps awaiting inspiration. At length he rose, and, seating himself upon the box once more, buried his white head dejectedly in his hands. The snowflakes filtered slowly through a crevice at the side, heaping fantastically into a miniature drift. Absently Uncle Noah

watched them, his mind traveling back to many a snowy Christmas "before the War."

Suddenly his brown face glowed with radiance and he drew a long breath of relief. "Job," he said, leaning forward and patting the turkey, "I has it! Yoh'd scarcely believe it, sah, but Ise a-goin' to save yoh."

He arose transformed, the despondent droop of his lean body replaced by an alert energy. "Now, Job," he coaxed, "I jus' wants yoh foh to come along wif me peaceable, sah. Ise after yoh to save yoh ol' hide from de Christmas platter."

But Job, with a malicious enjoyment of the game, was prancing wildly about the barn, flapping his wings in hysterical derision of his breathless pursuer. Brought to bay he squawked a protest and struggled violently as Uncle Noah unceremoniously imprisoned him beneath one arm.

"There, sah," exclaimed the negro triumphantly, "I has yoh! Yoh is sartinly the mos' wuthless turkey on dis yere plantation."

Tightly clasping the outraged tyrant Uncle Noah tiptoed to the lantern and blew it out. Then stumbling across the floor he stealthily left the barn and set out across the snowy fields to a tumble-down shanty, sole survivor of a string of negro huts long

since burned one by one in the library fireplace. Into its dilapidated interior he thrust the protesting turkey, pausing at the door as he struck a match to view the bird's temporary quarters.

"Now, Massa Job Fairfax," he began, "I knows yoh is jus' mad clean through. Yoh jus' naturally objects to bein' toted out in de snow in de middle o' de turkey night 'thout bein' asked. Yoh says yoh back is full o' snow. Well, I jus' asks yoh, Massa Job Fairfax, ain't dat better'n bein' wifout a head? Now, sah, I asks yoh to be mos' terrible quiet dis yere night. Ise a-goin' into Cotesville on a little trip an' I doan want de Colonel to know yoh here."

He closed the rickety door, and, hurrying back across the fields, sought the kitchen, his eyes behind their spectacles shining with excitement. Muffling himself in a quaint red knitted scarf, a dingy overcoat and a worn fur cap, plentifully earlapped, he left the house again, pausing only long enough to peer through the library window at the Colonel, who was reading aloud to his wife, both drawn up in the cheery warmth of a blazing wood fire. Then he hurried on along the road to town.

With a prayer in his heart for the success of his mission Uncle Noah trudged sturdily down the two miles to Cotesville, past Major Verney's old planta-

tion, the cheery lights of the great house twinkling brightly through a curtain of snow, and into the snow-laden air of the village streets alive with Christmas shoppers. Holly and mistletoe, Christmas trees filling the air with the odor of pine, dancing snowflakes and bright lights, wonderful windows wreathed and dotted in Christmas glitter, and cheery voices—who could resist them? Uncle Noah felt his heart quiver with hope; jubilantly he turned his steps toward the railroad station ahead.

The Northern Express flashed through the snow and came to a stop with a clang and a roar, disgorging a chattering holiday crowd who paused for a change of cars at Cotesville on their southbound trips. Uncle Noah hastened his shuffling footsteps: the Northern Express with its horde of transient visitors had been a vital part of the inspiration. Upon the station platform people stamped up and down in the snow or laughed and chatted, quite oblivious to the timid gaze of the old darky who slowly made his way among them. One by one Uncle Noah left them all behind, a great disappointment in his face. In their laughing countenances he had found nothing of what he sought.

III

JUST ahead a girl appeared from the shadows and walked quickly toward the waiting-room. Uncle Noah looked into her fresh, sweet face; then his own lit up with renewed hope and he followed her in and touched her timidly on the arm. The girl turned, revealing a face rosy with cold, and a pair of warm gray eyes fringed in lashes of black, eyes that frankly offered a glimpse of a girl's impulsive heart brimming over with Christmas spirit.

Uncle Noah removed the battered fur cap and bowed low with the deference of a Cavalier. "Ise jus' come in to—to ask yoh, Miss," he said simply, "if yoh'd like to buy an ol' nigger servant. Ise foh sale."

"For sale!" The girl took in the quaint figure with a glance of blank astonishment. "Why," she gasped, "surely you——"

"Ise ol', Miss," he interrupted timidly, but meeting her gaze with unwavering sincerity; "I specs Ise mos' a hundred; but Ise powahful tough an' full o' work, an'—an', Miss, I has to sell maself tonight 'cause—'cause——"

Uncle Noah paused uncertainly, seeking a fit expression of his dilemma, and the girl, readily intuitive, glanced swiftly about to assure herself that

the waiting-room was free from unsympathetic eavesdroppers. Then, strangely drawn by this quaint old vender of humanity, and warmly eager to put him more at his ease, she impulsively pushed a rocking-chair toward the old stove in the center and motioned him to be seated. But Uncle Noah had been reared in the Fairfax family, and a Fairfax never sat when a lady was still upon her feet. With a courtly gesture the old man bowed her to the chair she had drawn for him. A quick gleam of approval flashed in the gray eyes and with a deepening flush of puzzled interest, the girl instantly seated herself, unfastening the silver fox at her throat as she felt the warmth of the old country stove.

"Please, I would so *much* rather you, too, would sit down," she said impulsively, and as Uncle Noah drew forward another of the rickety old rocking-chairs with which the Cotesville waiting-room was dotted, she bent toward him—a light in the wonderful gray eyes that won Uncle Noah's heart.

"Tell me," she said kindly: "Tell me just why you want to sell yourself."

No, she had not laughed at him! Uncle Noah glowed to the tips of his fingers at the ready sympathy of her tone. He beamed mildly at her over his spectacles, turning the old fur cap round and

round in his hands as he sought to voice the words that struggled to his lips. "Ol' Massa's money—an', Miss, he hain't had much since de War; jus' 'nuff to live comfutable—all go in de Cotesville bank crash las' fall an' he doan want ol' Mis' foh to know. Ise de only one o' de niggers whut's left, an' dere's only one ol' turkey gobbler left o' de stock. He's my ol' pet, Miss, mos' like a chile, an'—an'——" Uncle Noah choked.

The girl's eyes were misty velvet. "And he told you to kill your pet for the Christmas dinner?" she finished gently.

Uncle Noah nodded. "Massa done say we mus' hab a turkey foh de Christmas dinner, or ol' Mis'll suspect de—de financial crisis whut we're in. Out in de barn I prays foh an inspiration an' I 'spect it come."

"And so you decided to sell yourself——" began the girl.

"Yas'm." Uncle Noah's voice had grown apologetic. "Yoh see, Miss, Ise de only thing whut I really owns 'cept dis yere ol' stickpin. Cose Ise free now, but I reckons if I has a mind to sell maself de Norf can't stop me. Ise sellin' ma own property." There was a gentle defiance in the old negro's quaint argument.

"And you—you wouldn't accept a—a loan?" The girl flushed.

The negro's hurt eyes were answer enough. Uncle Noah had not lived in an atmosphere permeated with Fairfax pride without feeling its influence.

"Ise not askin' foh charity, Miss," he averred stubbornly. "Ise a-sellin' sumthin'. I reckons if yoh buy me, Miss, an' yoh lemme go back an' stay Christmas wif ol' Massa, I'll sell maself cheap. Yoh see Ise a-plannin' first to buy a turkey whut'll take Job's place on de platter, an' den to give de Massa a gran' Christmas wif de rest o' de money what I gits foh maself, savin' out jus' enough to buy ma ol' turkey an' come to yoh first day after Christmas. It'll be hard to leave ol' Massa and Mis', but I reckons it's jus' gotta be done."

Uncle Noah gulped and blinked, and there was a glimmer of wet lashes about the warm gray eyes that had won his heart.

The girl was silent so long that Uncle Noah shifted uneasily; but at last she spoke a little tremulously. "For what price will you sell yourself?" she asked, and Uncle Noah never doubted but that she regarded the purchase in the same light in which he himself had viewed it.

He turned about for his purchaser's thorough inspection, his bald head above the fringe of white wool about it glistening in the lamplight. "Do yoh think Ise wuth, say, twenty-five dollahs?" he queried, regarding her fixedly over his spectacles.

The girl touched her throat with an unconscious gesture. "Yes, you are," she cried impulsively; "you are indeed!" And before Uncle Noah had quite time to adjust himself to the joy of his unique sale the girl thrust a roll of bills into his hands and disappeared through the station door.

IV

UNCLE NOAH hobbled after her. His new mistress had quite forgotten to tell him where to deliver himself when his Christmas with the Colonel was over. But when he reached the door she was eagerly greeting a man who had just alighted from a waiting carriage. Uncle Noah could but dimly see him, but as the genial voice reached his ears he halted in the shadow quite content. It was Major Verney. The fact that the Colonel's old friend and neighbor had driven in from Fernlands to meet the radiant lady whose great gray eyes, Uncle Noah now recalled, had had the Verney look which endeared the owner of Fernlands to all who knew him, seemed to the watching negro a direct interposition of Providence. A scant mile of cottonfields lay between the two plantations, and, Christmas over, Uncle Noah had but to trudge across the fields to deliver himself to the Major's guest.

"And, Ruth," concluded Major Verney in laughing reprimand, "you have kept me waiting. Why, child, the Northern Express came in fifteen minutes ago."

Uncle Noah did not catch the girl's reply as Major Verney assisted her into the carriage and they drove rapidly away.

The old darky beamed happily after the retreating carriage; then, with his hand tightly clasped about the precious roll of greenbacks for which he had so willingly bartered his freedom, he began a tour of the Cotesville stores. When at length he staggered into the big grocery store for his final purchases he was laden with a miscellaneous collection of Christmas packages from which he was cheerfully disentangled by the bulky proprietor himself. Uncle Noah made a critical pilgrimage about the store, pausing at last before a counter where the proprietor had laid out a number of turkeys for the careful inspection of this beaming shopper about to select an understudy for the incomparable Job. A very respectable fowl was presently mantled in brown paper and laid beside the other bundles, along with sundry bags of cranberries and apples, oranges and nuts, celery and raisins, cigars for the Colonel, a box of candy for Mrs. Fairfax, huge bunches of holly and mistletoe, Christmas wreaths for the windows, and a great bag of cracked corn for the reprieved tyrant gloomily roosting in the ruined old negro hut.

As Uncle Noah carefully counted out the money required to purchase this astonishing outlay the bulky proprietor asked pleasantly: "Uncle Noah, do

you happen to know where I can get a good woman to scrub up my store every morning?"

Uncle Noah fingered his scarfpin uncertainly. "How much do yoh pay foh de work?" he queried.

"Fifty cents a day."

The negro leaned forward in tense expectancy. "Do yoh 'spect I could do it?" he demanded excitedly.

The proprietor, secretly astonished by the old man's manner, nodded assuringly. "Why, yes, you could easily; it's nothing much; but the Colonel——"

"Colonel doan have foh to know," exclaimed Uncle Noah. "I comes yere mornin's foh he's up—an' I 'clare to goodness, sah, I needs de money mos' powahful."

The proprietor was easy-going and too phlegmatic to harbor curiosity. So the bargain was straightway sealed under a pledge of deepest secrecy.

Somewhat confused by the unusual series of events, Uncle Noah, his eyes shining with a strange excitement, started for the door, quite forgetting the countless packages on the counter.

The proprietor recalled him with a hearty laugh. "Uncle Noah," he called, "you've forgotten one or two little bundles here."

With a smothered gasp the old negro hurried back. But try as they would, room for all the numerous bundles could not be found. The proprietor energetically tucked bundles into all of Uncle Noah's pockets, piled them tower fashion upon his arms, and even hung a collection bound together with a string over his shoulder, while Uncle Noah wheezed and groaned and struggled to find new and unsuspected storage space in his clothes, but still there remained bundles and bundles at which Uncle Noah gazed over his spectacles in growing discomfiture.

"Whut am I a-goin' to do?" he demanded. "I nevah can come all de way back yere in de snow wif dese yere ol' legs o' mine."

"Get one of them station cabs," advised the grocer; and so, after considerable discussion, the bundle problem was solved.

Ten minutes later Uncle Noah entered a hired carriage for the first time in his life. At the town florist's he rapped a timid signal to the driver to stop, and, glowing with anticipation, spryly shuffled into the warm, scented air of the little shop. Here, to the smiling clerk's astonishment, he ordered a bunch of violets to be delivered Christmas morning

to "de young lady wif de gray eyes whut's at Major Verney's."

"Surely," smiled the clerk, "you don't want that on the card?"

But Uncle Noah was stubborn; more, he insisted on writing the inscription himself, his orthography quite as quaint as his penmanship, and so the card went to be read by the wonderful gray eyes in the morning.

Back through the snow in his rickety carriage rolled Uncle Noah, rattling home along the snowy road down which he had trudged in the early evening, chuckling now intermittently in a mental rehearsal of his new plan.

"Fifty cents a day!" he thought, "an' tomorrow Ise a-goin' to slip over to Fernlands in de mornin' an' ask her to lemme buy maself back on de 'stallment plan. Mos' likely she'll take a dollar a week, an' wid all de rest o' dat grocer money ol' Mis' doan have to know whut de Colonel an' me is a-goin' through."

In accordance with Uncle Noah's whispered directions the cab crept gently up the driveway at Brierwood and paused at the kitchen door, where the driver, who had taken a great fancy to Uncle Noah, became transformed into a benevolent steve-

dore, tiptoeing in and out of the kitchen with the bundles which the old darky drew from the cavernous pit of the cab. Job's understudy came last, and Uncle Noah, tightly pressing the precious fowl in his arms, watched the carriage drive slowly away. Then, after an interval in the kitchen devoted to hiding his purchases, he sought the library, striving to simulate a decent depression over the assumed decapitation of Job.

Colonel Fairfax looked up inquiringly as he entered.

"Ise jus' come to tell yoh, sah," said Uncle Noah with a meaning glance at Mrs. Fairfax, "dat I has de turkey all ready foh de oven."

A faint red crept through the Colonel's skin, but he met the darky's eyes squarely. "Thank you, Uncle Noah!" he said, and the negro shuffled hurriedly away.

In his old rocking-chair by the kitchen fire Uncle Noah, alert and excited, waited until he heard the Colonel and Mrs. Fairfax go up to bed; then, chuckling to himself, he extinguished the kitchen lights, and, carrying one of his Christmas bundles, plodded across the field to Job's nocturnal hermitage. The light of a match revealed the tyrant

roosting glumly on the summit of a ruined plowshare.

"Ise brought yoh a Christmas surprise, Massa Job Fairfax," said Uncle Noah, and he sprinkled the floor of the hut thick with corn that the turkey might find it in the morning.

With his heart full of thanksgiving the negro plodded homeward through the snow. As he reached the old barn the great clock in the library struck twelve and faintly through the snowy air floated the distant silvery chimes of the Cotesville bells, clear and sweet, ringing in a Christmas morning.

Creeping to bed long after the first rooster had crowed Uncle Noah had sought the kitchen again with the sunrise, his tired eyes opening jubilantly upon a snapping cold Christmas morning radiant in gold and white. Downstairs clusters of holly and mistletoe festooned doors and windows, dotted the old-fashioned hanging lamps with spots of crimson, and crowned the family portraits with royal diadems, and evergreen wreaths hung in the windows —all the work of a wrinkled pair of faithful brown hands toiling while the world slept. In the library a blazing wood fire leaped and crackled, while in the dining-room the table was spread for breakfast.

Certain long-needed articles of china, which had mysteriously disappeared from time to time since the autumn, dotted a tablecloth free from holes (a new one subjected to a severe laundry process during the night), and the napkins no longer resembled Ku-Klux masks. A great bowl of purple orchids glowed at Mrs. Fairfax's plate.

V

THE Colonel greeted the Christmas festoons of holly in the library with a stare of astonished approval. A question had risen to his lips, but the warning look in Uncle Noah's eyes as they rested on Mrs. Fairfax had checked it. These two had had many financial and domestic secrets from the dear lady, and the Colonel promptly decided that Uncle Noah had sold some forgotten relic and had once more made use of his highly developed faculty for expanding a small sum to incredible elasticity, and he praised the result accordingly. Mrs. Fairfax, too, brightened wonderfully, yielding to the Christmas spirit with which the old darky had contrived to fill the house.

Uncle Noah felt a glow of delight at their outspoken appreciation, and, bowing elaborately, he ushered his master and mistress in to breakfast. Here again, as he seated himself, the Colonel was conscious of an agreeable flood of astonishment. There was quite an air about this Christmas breakfast. Fixing his keen eyes on the tablecloth and napkins he stealthily fingered them with a searching look at the waiting negro. Fortunately his interest was speedily diverted. He caught sight of the orchids and the tear-stained face of his wife

bending over them. With a wrench of his chair he arose.

"Patricia!" he said stormily, "did I not say that nothing of his—did I not——" he paused and gulped. "Uncle Noah," he added unsteadily, "that turkey of yours is gobbling like a fiend under the window; you—he——"

The Colonel stopped abruptly, reddened as his eyes fell upon the negro (Uncle Noah had wisely turned away), and sternly reseated himself, somewhat confused by his thoughtless reference to the late lamented Job.

Uncle Noah hobbled from the room, his brown face working convulsively. In the kitchen he shook with silent laughter, doubling over breathlessly and clasping his hands over his stomach in aching distress.

"And what, Uncle Noah," asked the Colonel kindly as the old negro presently reëntered the dining-room, "have we for our Christmas breakfast?"

"Well, sah," Uncle Noah began fluently, "we has grapefruit, cereal wif cream, quail on toast, fried oysters—er—oatmeal, hot muffins, fried chicken, co'nbread an' coffee!"

The Colonel, appearing to be thoughtfully considering his choice, replied as usual: "It all sounds

delicious, Uncle Noah, but I have a touch of my old enemy dyspepsia to-day. I think I shall have some cornbread and coffee, and so will Mrs. Fairfax."

"I doan think you quite understand me, sah," averred Uncle Noah, "an', sah, I 'spects yoh dyspepsia ain't so bad dis mornin'. We has foh breakfast, sah, grapefruit, cereal wif cream, quail on toast, fried oysters—er—*oatmeal, fried chicken, hot muffins, co'nbread an' coffee!*"

There was no mistaking the emphasis this time. Colonel Fairfax darted a lightning glance at the negro and amended his selection with a question in his voice. "Well, now I come to think of it, Uncle Noah," he said, "my dyspepsia isn't nearly so bad. I'll have, let me see, oatmeal—that was in the list, I believe—er—fried chicken—am I right?—muffins, cornbread and coffee."

There was a conviction in the Colonel's deep voice that something extraordinary was afoot, and Uncle Noah, flurried by its ominous ring, hurried from the room. Dimly he had pictured his master's gracious astonishment and pleasure. Any queries relative to the financial source of the Christmas delicacies, however, had been lost entirely in the

darky's jubilant excitement. Now he groaned in dismay.

"Yoh is in a mess for sure, Uncle Noah," he apostrophized himself. "Whut'll yoh do when it come time foh dinnah? Yere yoh has a Christmas dinnah fit foh a King, an' de Colonel he know right well dat we has only a little lef' from de money whut we done get when we sold de silver teapot."

It was Christmas, however, and Uncle Noah felt convinced that the Providence that had watched so well over his Christmas Eve would order a special dispensation for his new dilemma. While awaiting its manifestation he would studiously avoid the Colonel, and would slip across to Fernlands, once the pseudo Job was safe in the oven, and beg the gray-eyed lady to accept a dollar a week of the grocer's money in his inspired scheme of self-redemption.

With this in mind Uncle Noah served the breakfast, hurried his preparations for the midday feast, and at five minutes of eleven, the turkey safely roasting, set out across the fields for Major Verney's.

At Fernlands the eleven strokes of the grandfather's clock in the great hall found the gray-eyed lady in the arms of a young fellow who had but that

instant bounded lightly up the walk from the sleigh Major Verney had dispatched to Cotesville to meet the Northern Express. The Major, smilingly awaiting his opportunity to greet the newcomer, ran his eye approvingly over the lines of the well-knit figure and handsome face.

"Well, Dick," said the Major, advancing with outstretched hand as the girl flushed prettily and smoothed back the dark mist of hair from her forehead, "how are you, my boy? Busy, of course. We read fine things of you in the papers at times." Then, as the young man took off his overcoat, "What, sir," the Major inquired, "do you mean by falling in love with my only niece? Here my brother writes me that his daughter is engaged to a man who knows me, and will I pack off a carload of testimonials by special messenger indorsing the little rascal who used to steal my apples. What, sir, do you mean?"

"Well, Major," Dick answered as he was ushered into the big living-room, his laughing eyes alight with happiness, "she had the Verney eyes, and you remember I always liked them." He sank into a chair by Ruth with a smiling glance at the Major. "It is unusually cold for down here. There's a real bracing Northern sting in the air. And what a

snow! It's packed down so that the runners fairly flew. Major, do sit down!"

The Major was still bustling about, urging Ruth into another chair by the fire that he himself might sit by Dick, poking energetically at the blazing logs, and firing a volley of directions at black Sam.

"There!" he exclaimed, finally seating himself. "Now, sir, relative to this infatuated young person on my left, who has condescended to visit her uncle for the first time since she arrived on the planet. I met her last night according to telegraphed instructions, and she kept me waiting—let me see——"

"Uncle!" protested Ruth, "you've added fifteen minutes to that wait every time you've mentioned it."

"My dear child, politeness alone has kept me from naming the full extent of my wait. If you please, sir," he turned to Dick, "she was in the clutches of a beggar who obtained twenty-five dollars by a most extraordinary yarn."

"Twenty-five dollars!" Dick whistled, smiling at the flush that crept up to the gray eyes. "Was it an aged father this time or a hungry brood of motherless waifs, Ruthie?"

"Dick, listen!" cried the girl. "Uncle misjudges

him. It was a dear old colored man and he told me the strangest story."

"You don't often find a grateful beggar who sends you violets in the morning purchased with some of your own shekels," said the Major, pinching the flushed cheek. "Tell him, Ruthie; it was odd, and I believe I'd have done the same thing myself."

The girl flashed a grateful look at him and then told the story of her purchase of the night before so eloquently that the Major and Dick heard her through with sober faces, secretly touched by its pathos. "And he must have recognized Uncle," she ended, "for the violets came this morning with the quaintest card."

For an instant she dreamily scanned the fire, seeing in its glowing embers the brown wrinkled negro face with its honest eyes, peering at her over his spectacles in troubled apprehension; then she sprang to her feet.

"Uncle Edward," she cried, "did you tell Uncle Neb to wait with the sleigh? Those sleigh-bells are beginning to sound hysterical."

"Merciful goodness!" cried the Major; "I certainly did. I had the strictest commands to drive in to church for Mother Verney at eleven o'clock.

Hi, Sam, you black rascal, tell Uncle Neb I'll be right out."

"I'll tell him, Uncle," called Ruth, flying swiftly up the long hall to the library window.

But no clear call went ringing over the snow to Uncle Neb; instead, there was silence, broken at length by a voice that called softly in great excitement, "Dick! Uncle Edward! do come here. Look!" she cried as they quickly joined her. "You see, Uncle, he didn't forget!"

Smiling, the two men looked from the window. An old negro muffled in a threadbare overcoat was plodding up the walk, his eyes scanning the house with evident curiosity.

The Major uttered a quick exclamation and the girl wheeled about.

"Don't you see?" she cried. "He's come today, honest old fellow that he is! See, Dick——"

She stopped abruptly, looking from one to the other. There was something in the two stern faces staring beyond her at the bent negro that struck a chill to her heart. Dick's face had gone white, and the Major's hand had stolen to the younger man's shoulder as if to steady him.

There was a startled incredulity in the Major's

face as he said: "Brace up, old man! You didn't know and neither did I."

"Ruth," Dick asked unsteadily, "is that the old colored man whose—whose master——"

"Yes!" cried the girl, the sharp pain of premonition in her voice. "Oh, Dick, who is he?"

Dick's miserable eyes sought hers as he answered, "It's—it's Dad's Uncle Noah. Ruth, I——" He turned and sought the hall.

Ruth's face flamed at his words. Uncle Noah's pathetic story came crowding over her again in the light of Dick's revelation. His father and mother! The stern old Colonel, of whom Dick always spoke with such respectful loyalty in spite of their quarrel, and the dear mother, whose tender eyes gazing from the old-fashioned daguerreotype Dick always carried had made her choke with sudden tears—these two were Uncle Noah's beloved "ol' Massa an' ol' Mis'"!

She turned; the Major had followed Dick to the hallway. A shuffling step sounded on the porch outside, and the girl hurried toward the door, a sudden light of daring in her eyes. Impulse had always ruled the Verneys, and Ruth was a Verney from the crown of her dark head to the tips of her small feet. Catching up Grandmother Verney's

long cloak hanging over a chair, she softly left the house.

Dick, struggling into his overcoat, turned at the Major's touch on his arm.

"Just a minute, Dick." Major Verney's genial voice was sympathetic as a woman's. "Remember that what the Colonel refused in prosperity he's not likely to take in adversity. Sit down here by the fire until we talk it over."

"But, Major"—there was a note of anguish in the boy's voice—"I must go to him. Think of Uncle Noah selling himself to help them, and I——"

But the Major had already removed the overcoat and gently pushed his guest into a chair by the fire. "Yes, yes," he said as he seated himself; "we know all about that, my boy; but I'm afraid, Dick," he added regretfully, "that the Colonel wouldn't let you in. He's very bitter."

Dick groaned. He was calmer now. "You're right, Major," he said steadily; "it hurt so at first that I didn't think. I can't go now." He leaned forward anxiously. "The Cotesville Bank——?" he questioned abruptly.

"Crashed in the autumn—in September." Dick

bit his lip, and the Major added: "He was heavily interested."

Dick stared at the fire. "It was all he had," he said.

"I see." The Major's quiet voice gave no hint of his own emotion. "I didn't know. Of course I heard he had lost something; we all did; but I thought he had other money."

"No. Tell me, Major, you've been going to Brierwood this winter just as usual?"

"Of course; every Wednesday night. The Colonel and I are too old to alter the habit of a lifetime, and besides we both love that long evening playing chess. There's always a roaring wood fire and a steaming pot of coffee, and your mother always plays Beethoven for us just before I go."

A look of relief shone in Dick's eyes. "'Always a fire,'" he repeated. "I'm glad of that. There was no suggestion of—of want?"

"Heavens, no!" The Major's deep voice was full of assurance. "Last week," he added thoughtfully, "the coffee was pretty weak, but it never occurred to me that——" he stopped abruptly, rose from his chair with sudden energy, violently blew his nose, and tramped down to the end of the hall and back. "Damn the Fairfax pride!" he ex-

claimed fiercely. "Here Uncle Noah has been coming into the library Wednesday nights and telling the Colonel that the stock had all been bedded down for the night when all the time there's been nothing left but this confounded old turkey gobbler we've been hearing about. He swore last week that somebody had stolen the silver teapot. Abominable old liar! He must have sold it." The Major threw out his arms with a wrathful gesture. "All this comedy, if you please, for my benefit. Here I've been there every week, and never suspected, thanks to the infernal stratagems of that black fiend of an Uncle Noah. Damn the Fairfax pride!"

The Major sat down as suddenly as he had risen, and, bending over, attacked the fire with vicious energy.

"Tell me, Major," Dick presently asked, "have you ever mentioned me to the Colonel since I went North?"

"Once." The Major made a wry face. "I never tried again."

Dick colored. "Does he know about Ruth?"

"No, I dared not mention it." The Major looked at the other intently. "Dick," he said, "what was this quarrel all about, anyway?"

"In the beginning, Major," admitted the young

man, flushing, "it was so childish that—I'm ashamed to speak of it."

"Out with it!" commanded the Major. "I won't be hoodwinked by a Fairfax any longer."

"Well, sir, if you must know, it was about—the War."

"The War!" exploded the Major. "By gad, sir, what about the War?"

"Dad and I were talking it over, and—well, to be frank, Major, I said I thought the North had been right, and that, if I had been in the world at the time, I would have fought with them despite my kinsmen."

"Go on! Did you fight in any other post-mortem wars? The Revolution, or the fall of Rome?"

Dick ignored the sarcasm. "My sympathy for the North made him furious," he went on. "We quarreled terribly and both of us said things that I know we didn't mean. It was the Fairfax temper, sir; I——"

"Damn the Fairfax temper!" roared the Major. "Thank goodness, the Verneys are mild!"

Dick laughed in spite of himself. "I apologized," he continued soberly, "but he wouldn't listen; told me to get out; said if I chose to change my opinions

about the North, we'd talk it over, and I, of course, refused."

"Of course!" interpolated the Major grimly.

"I've written since, suggesting that we forget it all and start anew, but he won't listen, sir."

The Major stroked his beard ominously. "Did it ever occur to you, Dick," he demanded, "that enough families were estranged by that War without carrying it over into the Twentieth Century? Let me see—how long after the War were you born? Twenty years, wasn't it? I remember; your father and Ruth's were married about the same time."

"Every man has a right to his opinions, Major," Dick asserted with spirit. "Of course I've no personal knowledge of the War, but"—stubbornly—"the North was right."

"Fairfax to the core!" thought the Major in secret admiration. "The boy's his father all over again. Well, Dick," he said mildly, "we older men of the South feel a little differently about this War; but, my boy, these post-bellum disputes don't pay, particularly when one participant was born long after the guns were quiet. In my opinion you didn't know enough about the War to quarrel over it. Great Scott, quarreling over the War! Dick, you deserved to be spanked."

The jingle of sleigh-bells rang blithely through the silence that followed, and the Major sprang to his feet. "Merciful Heavens!" he exclaimed, staring at his watch, "it's twelve o'clock. That must be Uncle Neb still waiting, and Grandmother Verney's probably standing on the church porch yet, mad as a hornet." He was at the door now, calling wildly to the negro: "Uncle Neb, why under the canopy didn't you call me?"

The darky scratched his head. "Massa Edward," he confessed, "I ain't been yere. I jus' druv Missy Ruth over to Brierwood with Uncle Noah to see Colonel Fairfax."

The Major summoned Dick in great excitement. "Dick," he exclaimed, "get into your overcoat as fast as you can and drive over to Brierwood with Uncle Neb. Ruth's gone ahead of you, and you couldn't have a better deputy short of an angel."

Dick wrung the Major's hand and fled to the waiting sleigh, the color flooding his face.

"And, Uncle Neb," called the Major frantically, "hurry back, or Grandmother Verney will be tramping home in the snow, rheumatism or no rheumatism."

With a wild jingle of bells that seemed to Dick the hysterical echo of his own heartbeats the sleigh was off.

VI

AT Brierwood the Colonel, wrought to a high tension of excitement by the mysterious flood of Christmas prosperity, of which the latest manifestation had been a fresh newspaper dated the night before, surmounted by a cigar of no mean label, had been vainly searching for Uncle Noah, bewildered by the darky's odd vagaries which had culminated in the culprit's disappearance. Just as the Colonel had returned to the library, drawn his favorite chair up to the cheerful blaze of the wood fire, and opened his favorite volume, a door in the rear of the house shut softly, and, convinced that Uncle Noah had returned, the Colonel closed his book and adjusted his glasses, determined to have an immediate reckoning with the author of all this Christmas cheer.

A light step sounded behind his chair, and the Colonel turned, quite primed for an altercation. In an instant, however, the old man was on his feet, bowing grandly in spite of his astonishment. A girl stood in the doorway, her cloak falling loosely about her figure. Her cheeks were blazing scarlet from the cold, and the deep gray eyes, fringed in black, bore something in their warm depths that stirred familiar memories.

"Colonel," she said, stretching out a slim, white

hand, "I'm Ruth Verney, Major Edward's niece. I've just driven one of your servants" (rare tact was but one of the Verney charms) "over from Fernlands and I thought you wouldn't mind if I ran in for an instant to enjoy your fire."

"Why, child," the Colonel cried, forgetting all else in his delight, "you must be Walter Verney's daughter." Ruth smilingly nodded. "I know it," he went on; "you have his eyes. Sit down here. I knew your father well; when we were boys he and I were inseparable." He paused and added simply: "That was before the War."

The dark lashes veiled for an instant, a certain excitement in the gray eyes. "I'm down for Christmas with Uncle Edward," Ruth explained; and before the Colonel had fully realized it they were chatting happily together like old friends. Suddenly the girl exclaimed: "Colonel Fairfax, I know you'll be glad to hear that Dad and the Major are friends again."

"Indeed I am!" agreed the Colonel heartily. "In the old days we would have laughed at the man who could possibly have suggested a quarrel for the Verney twins."

"Nothing but a cruel war could have done it," said the girl quietly. "What does it matter now,"

she demanded impetuously, "if Daddy did fight for the North and the Major for the South? It's all so long ago that a quarrel about it is foolish."

The Colonel cleared his throat. "Yes, it is foolish," he admitted.

"You see," Ruth leaned eagerly forward, "I met a man who knew the Major, and he praised him so highly that I lay awake all one night thinking what a pity it was that two such splendid men as Daddy and his brother should still be enemies over an old bygone war. You know, Colonel, they would have been friends ages ago, only each was too proud to make the first advance. Wasn't it foolish?"

The Colonel nodded, carefully shading his eyes from the fire.

"They were just wasting precious years of companionship," went on the girl. "That thought came to me as I lay awake in bed, and the very next morning I wrote to the Major. You see, Colonel Fairfax, I feel this way," she explained. "There's no North and no South. Daddy and the Major are citizens of the United States."

The Colonel rose and busied himself about the fire. When he put back the tongs and reseated himself his cheeks were hot from the contact with its blazing warmth.

"And that's what I told Uncle Edward in the letter, and, Colonel, he wrote me such a glorious letter back that I had to show it to Daddy. He was delighted, and he said that any two men who fought over the battles of a dead war were 'old fools.'"

Colonel Fairfax winced.

"So," finished the girl with glowing eyes, "Uncle Edward came rushing North in a great state of excitement, and that's how I came to be down here over Christmas."

In her impetuous criticism of the wartime quarrel that had separated the Verney twins for more than forty years, and the expression of her broad, impulsive patriotism, Colonel Fairfax had listened to certain truths which had long been subconsciously germinating in his own mind. Before he could recover from the surprise of finding that he agreed with her, Ruth, touched by the lines of care graven upon his fine old face, had caught her breath with a little sob, slipped from her place by the fire, and was kneeling beside his chair, her eyes starry with light, her lovely face glorified with its tender appeal.

"Colonel," she cried, a catch in her voice, "I'm going to marry Dick! It was he who praised Uncle Edward so."

The Colonel's face grew scarlet; then he laid a trembling hand upon the girl's bowed head. "Child," he said, "you—you——" Tears blinded his eyes and he stopped.

In the silence that followed came the sharp sound of a quick footfall. The Colonel looked up. Dick Fairfax stood in the doorway, his eyes burning strangely in the white misery of his face.

The father rose and straightened himself with something of his old, stern dignity; but at a warm, girlish touch he gulped.

"Dick," he said queerly, holding out a trembling hand, "we're—we're both citizens of the United States, and—it's Christmas Day."

Almost before he had finished the boy had bounded across the floor and wrung the outstretched hand, his face radiant with delight. By the fire Ruth cried softly and the Colonel gently patted her dark head, his eyes full of tenderness. Then taking refuge from the sharp pain of his emotion in austere command: "Dick," he said sternly, "go to your mother."

When Uncle Noah, in a state of beatification impossible to describe, summoned the four to the wonderful Christmas dinner Colonel Fairfax was eagerly listening to the tales of Dick's success as told by

Ruth, and Dick was gently patting his mother's gray hair, a halo of silver crowning a face radiant with happiness—a Christmas quartet whose reconciliation Uncle Noah could as yet but imperfectly comprehend. That he had been the unconscious instrument of it all the gray-eyed lady had already told him; but Uncle Noah, busy with numberless culinary problems in the kitchen, had not as yet had time to ferret it out.

At four o'clock Major Verney, who had been restrained from dashing over to Brierwood hours before only by the necessity of soothing the ruffled feelings of his irate mother after her long wait for a belated sleigh on the porch of the Cotesville church, blustered in with the aggrieved old lady upon his arm.

"We've come to supper," announced the Major. "No, Dick," as the Colonel rose, "sit down. I know all about it, and to-night you're all going back to Fernlands with me to celebrate the betrothal of these two youngsters."

"It has been a day of mysteries," the Colonel said; "but will someone please tell me what Uncle Noah was doing over at Fernlands this morning when he was needed here?"

A silence fell over the little group. The subject

was one whose delicacy forbade the ghost of a blunder.

It was the Major who at last drew his old friend into the deep window recess where but the night before he had watched Uncle Noah pursuing the elusive Job, and told him the story of the faithful old negro's Christmas Eve.

The Colonel listened intently, the snowy landscape outside growing blurred and misty as the record of the old man's devotion gradually unfolded. Before the Major had finished the Colonel's hand had crept to the bell at his side, and, as the darky's shuffling footsteps echoed along the corridor, he turned again and stared with unseeing eyes at the outline of the old barn. Dick shifted the log and a crimson glow irradiated the old library, making a halo of soft fire about the figure of the old darky as he paused before his master.

"Uncle Noah," said the Colonel brokenly, "I——" but his voice failed him, and he wrung the old man's hand in silence.

The Major bent and whispered a few swift words to the startled darky and a great light illumined the brown face. "Doan yoh go foh to thank me, Massa Dick," he crooned, patting the Colonel's hand with reverent devotion; "I ain't wuth it. All I needs,

sah, is jus' a good kick for disobeyin' orders. 'Spects I doan understan' it all, but I does know, sah, dat de lady wid de gray eyes whut's at Major Verney's is—is a good fairy, sah. An', Colonel, de Christmas supper am ready."

Joyously they filed out, Dick lingering in the firelight for a word with Ruth. Grandmother Verney, in high good humor, went out on the Colonel's arm, the grievance of the morning's belated sleigh quite forgotten in the genial warmth of the Fairfax hospitality.

"And what, Uncle Noah," asked the Colonel of the old darky as usual, "have we to-night for supper?"

"Well, sah," beamed Uncle Noah, "we has ham an' turkey, an' cranberry sauce an' celery, an' baked apples an' mince pie an' fruitcake an'—an'—laws-a-massy, Massa, Ise too kerflusterated to ricomember any mo'."

"We'll have them all!" cried the Colonel.

A terrific gobbling arose beneath the dining-room window, and the Major rose and stared out in astonishment. "Merciful goodness, Dick," he demanded, "what is that horrible racket?"

"Laws-a-massy, Massa," cried the old darky, "it's Job! I let him out a while back, sah, an' I

done fohgot to put him to roost. I reckon he's come to remind me."

And, beaming happily at the radiant Christmas party, Uncle Noah flung up the window and in a terrible voice commanded the tyrant to be silent.

THE END

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